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# Celebrating Afropolitan Identities? Contemporary African World Literatures in English

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**Abstract:** Against the background of today's debate on Afropolitanism, this article discusses three contemporary African novels as instances of world literatures, focusing on their creative modelling of open, non-Eurocentric worlds in motion. Taking existing research in the field of world literature into account, we argue that the affective and effective uniqueness of world literatures only comes to the fore when considering their distinct power to creatively make worlds. We suggest understanding world literatures in terms of their capacity to create open, poly-centric worlds, which enmesh diverse places, multiple temporalities, situated practices and locally grounded experiences into open networks of reciprocal change. In theorizing world literatures as pluralized and multiple, we also try to overcome the privileging of western literature. The final section negotiates how these imaginative worlds interact, intersect and possibly collide with that world which is configured by labelling, marketing and canonizing a specific text as 'world literature'.

## 1 “Being African in the World”

In the last fifteen years or so a considerable number of diasporic African literatures have made their entry into the world literary space, reminding us once again of the complex and volatile dynamics underlying the making of world literatures. Comprising authors as diverse as Teju Cole, Taiye Selasi (born Taiye Tuakli-Wosornu), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, NoViolet Bulawayo and Dinaw Mengestu, these “young and creative cosmopolitan African immigrants” (Hassan 2012: 3) have readily been subsumed by critics under the label ‘Afropolitan’. As is well

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known, the term ‘Afropolitanism’ has been popularized by writer Taiye Selasi in her viral essay “Bye Bye Barbar”, published back in 2005. According to Selasi, the term captures the stylish “ethnic mixes”, the seemingly effortless multilingualism, “academic successes” and rather hip lifestyle of the “newest generation of African emigrants” (2005/2013: 528). Seeking to defy so-called Afro-pessimism and concomitant one-sided images of Africa perpetuated by western media, she programmatically proclaims:

You’ll know us by our funny blend of London fashion, New York jargon, African ethics, and academic successes. Some of us are ethnic mixes, e.g. Ghanaian and Canadian, Nigerian and Swiss; others merely cultural mutts: American accent, European affect, African ethos. Most of us are multilingual: in addition to English and a Romantic or two, we understand some indigenous tongue and speak a few urban vernaculars. [...] We are Afropolitans: not citizens, but Africans of the world. (Selasi 2005/2013: 528)

Firmly implicated in “African identity politics” (Wasihun 2016: 393), the term ‘Afropolitanism’ puts emphasis on the migratory patterns and open entanglements between locally grounded practices and global trajectories. As such, it seeks to designate a new way of being African in the world that moves beyond essentialist identity politics and fosters multi-local belongings as much as “multi-dimensional thinking” (Selasi 2005/2013: 530). This distinctively African mode of being cosmopolitan reconfigures the historically strained relation between “the African Continent” and what Selasi somewhat nonchalantly calls “the G8 city or two (or three)” (2005/2013: 528) as a transgressive play of in-between-ness, through which different and even conflicting values and identifications are brought into an open dialogue (Wasihun 2016: 393).

Proposed by Achille Mbembe (2007) to recall the histories of mobility and exchange that have gone into the making of African cultures, the neologism Afropolitanism has gained currency ever since the publication of Selasi’s essay. Several artists, museum curators, publishers and other cultural brokers have successfully mobilized the label to brand diasporic African art projects, and from a theoretical vantage-point, the concept was taken up and taken on by a number of critics, most prominently by Simon Gikandi. Just as Mbembe and Selasi, Gikandi too offers the term to reconceive of African identities as both locally grounded and transculturally connected and to complicate stereotypical notions of the continent as a locus of crisis. According to Gikandi, the term “constitutes a significant attempt to rethink African knowledge outside the trope of crisis. [...] Instead of conceiving the massive migration of Africans to other continents and countries as a loss, the idiom of Afropolitanism embraces movement across time and space as the condition of possibility of an African way of being” (2011: 9–10). Writer, photographer and art critic Teju Cole claims that the value the term has –

or at least the discussions it has sparked – is an acknowledgment of the political urgency of the category of class and a willingness to complicate unidimensional concepts of racialized African identities.<sup>1</sup> But of course, the concept of Afropolitanism was not only celebrated but also contested and criticized by a number of scholars and activists. Some – such as Chielozone Eze (2014: 239–240) – lamented the emphasis on a seemingly distinctively African mode of cosmopolitanism, asking why “an African” cannot “just be cosmopolitan” as the European or the Asian. Others, such as writer and journalist Binyavanga Wainaina, miss its engagement with global inequalities and decry the concept for its elitist and “product-driven” thrust, which, according to Wainaina, results in the commodification of both mobility and African identity (Wainaina, qtd. in Bosch Santana 2013). From this perspective, the concept is seen to be complicit with western hegemony, global capitalism and neoliberal biopolitics.

Whether the label Afropolitanism is a useful one or not and whether it can “name something other than the latest fashionable mobile identity” (Goyal 2014: xv) remains to be seen. To engage with these questions is not the main concern of our paper. Rather, we are interested in the – peculiarly undertheorized – meanings of ‘the world’, a term that, after all, underlies both concepts of Afropolitanism and (Afropolitan) world literatures. But which and whose world do these terms invoke? And who has the right to claim the world – and to what ends?

“A world is always as many worlds as it takes to make a world”, Jean-Luc Nancy (2000: 15) claims in *Being Singular Plural*. And indeed, there are multiple, at times even conflicting worlds at stake when talking about Afropolitan world literatures. In what follows our contribution will engage with different modellings of the world in discourses on Afropolitanism and on Afropolitan literatures. After a discussion of the concept of Afropolitanism [Part 2], our contribution will briefly engage with existing research in the field of world literature, arguing that the affective and effective uniqueness of world literatures only comes to the fore when also considering their power to make worlds [Part 3]. Our shift from world literature to world literatures is an attempt to rethink them in terms of the capacity to create open, polycentric and plural worlds, which enmesh diverse places, situated practices and locally grounded experiences into open networks. Our contribution will then proceed to scrutinize how the literary texts by Afropolitan writers, many of which have by now a firm place in the world literary canon, create specific versions of ‘the world’ and of being African in the world [Part 4]. In

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1 “The discourse around Afropolitanism foregrounds questions of class in ways the ‘I’m not Afropolitan’ crowd don’t want to deal with (and in ways the ‘I’m Afropolitan’ crowd are often too blithe about)” (Tweet 2014; qtd. in Bady 2016).

the final section, we will briefly engage with the question of how these imaginative worlds interact, intersect and possibly collide with the world that is configured by labelling, marketing and canonizing a specific text as ‘world literature’ [Part 5].

The structure is designed to bring into dialogue two different approaches to world literature that only rarely converge, namely established approaches that tie the definition of world literature to the capacity to “circulate beyond” its original site of production (Damrosch 2003: 4) and studies that focus on world literature’s world-making capacities and hence primarily scrutinize ways of poetic “worlding” (Cheah 2016: 8). Whereas text-external, frequently sociologically inspired studies of world literature analyse the “[l]iterary transmutation” through which agents – publishers, translators, prize committees and critics alike – transform literature into world literature (Casanova 2004: 11–13), text-immanent criticism is mainly concerned with the literary text itself and its potential to “open” (Cheah 2016: 11) the world. Broadly speaking, we argue that the worlds construed in literature on the one hand and canonization processes on the other frequently clash with one another: The capacities of literatures to open the world and enact crossings between “local points of view” and “global networks” (Walkowitz 2006: 2), it seems, are constrained by economic, political and normative forces regulating the canonization of world literatures.

## 2 Concepts of Afropolitanism: Roots and Routes in the World

According to Selasi Afropolitans are “Africans of the world” (2005/2013: 528); in a similar vein, Mbembe defines Afropolitanism as a “way of belonging to the world, of being in the world and inhabiting it, [that] has always been marked by, if not cultural mixing, than at least the interweaving of worlds” (2007: 28). This kind of intermingled worldliness, Mbembe continues, has long been an African “way of belonging to the world” (2007: 28), shaping African identities both in the diaspora and on the continent itself.<sup>2</sup> Gikandi subscribes to this understanding by claiming

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that Mbembe (2007), other than Selasi and Gikandi, puts great emphasis on the century-long history of Afropolitanism on the African continent. Highlighting the histories of exchange that have shaped pre-colonial, colonial and contemporary Africa, he argues for the recognition of “pre-colonial African modernity” (2007: 27) and thus challenges prevalent notions of the African continent as the other of western modernity. This also means that – again in contrast to Selasi and Gikandi – Mbembe is not so much interested in African diasporas but in the

that Afropolitanism designates “a way of being African in the world” and he expounds that this way of being in the world is “both rooted in specific local geographies but also transcendental of them” (Gikandi 2011: 9). Rather than pitting routes against roots, local situatedness against global mobility, the concept of Afropolitanism calls for what Anthony Appiah calls “rooted cosmopolitanism” (Appiah 2005: 256): it accommodates productive tensions between place and displacement, through which African cultures and identities are extended to diasporic spaces and integrated into a network of transcultural exchange.

With its emphasis on both rootedness and mobility, the concept of Afropolitanism must be understood as an attempt to bring together two distinct frameworks for understanding African identity, namely the frameworks offered by Pan-Africanism and the black Atlantic respectively (cf. Goyal 2014: xv; Mbembe 2007: 28). Broadly speaking, Pan-Africanism, designed as a counter-colonial movement, situates Africa as the origin of a genuinely African identity as it attempts to revitalize a largely suppressed African heritage. Reaffirming African values against European oppression and dominance, this more or less essentialized identity thrives on a set of binary oppositions, according to which the African is what the European is not.<sup>3</sup> The concept of the black Atlantic, which Paul Gilroy has prominently elaborated in his book *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* (1999), has explicitly been designed as a critique of the Pan-African framework. Taking the transatlantic circuits of African descended peoples as a point of departure for thinking about African identity, the concept foregrounds mobility, routes and dispersion rather than roots and origins. For Gilroy, it is not so much the mystified ‘homeland’ Africa that is constitutive of African identity, but the historical experience of transatlantic slavery and the subsequent histories of enforced travel, diaspora, trauma and discontinuity. According to Gilroy, the migratory patterns and fractures that shape African histories and spaces present a particular challenge to concepts of fixed territorial origin and originary belonging. Indeed, Gilroy maintains that Afrocentrism is even detrimental to claims of African self-representation, because it asserts the same binary patterns that underwrite Eurocentric racism and embraces a nostalgic image of Africa, presumably untouched by the ruptures of modernity. And yet, while Gilroy rightly takes issue with nativist and nationalist notions of ancestral Africa as a stable origin for

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ways in which exchange, collision, mobility and transfer have affected the continent. Accordingly, for Mbembe, the centers of Afropolitanism are not in the various diasporic spaces but in African metropolises. For him, contemporary Johannesburg epitomizes the worldly ethos of Afropolitanism.

3 Aimé Césaire’s notion of *négritude* (1939), fleshed out in the works of Léopold Senghor, is the most emblematic expression of this supposedly transhistorical African identity.

African history and identity, critics have a point when noting that “he fails to provide any alternative way of thinking about Africa” (Goyal 2014: v) and continues to posit Africa as the static, premodern other of the mobility and “dynamics of differentiation” (Gilroy 1999: 197) characteristic of diasporic spaces.

“[R]eading ‘Africa’ in the black Atlantic”, as Yogita Goyal (2014: iv) puts it, the concept of Afropolitanism calls for a reciprocal inflection of place and displacement. Rather than understanding place and displacement, or Africa and the west, as binary oppositions, the Afropolitan model stresses their multifaceted interplay and foregrounds spaces of entanglement, without ignoring the importance of locally embedded practices and situated knowledge. According to this logic, African spaces form a discontinuous network, bringing together plural African geographies as well as the various diasporic spaces in the Americas, Europe and elsewhere. As Mbembe and Gikandi stress, this network includes the African continent, which is itself shaped by complex processes of exchange and mobility. The emerging discontinuities and multi-layered temporalities integrate Africa into the dynamics of modernity. Moreover, the recognition that Africans can be linked to several places at once, all of which shape their sense of identification, poses a challenge to identitarian concepts that posit slavery as the sole “historical crucible for modern blackness” (Goyal 2014: vi).

But even as the term Afropolitanism made it possible to rethink the relation between African places and “other worlds” (Gikandi 2011: 9) in terms of reciprocal exchange and multiple trajectories, it fails to account for different modes of mobility as well as for the paradox between “high levels of mobility” enjoyed by an élite and the “immobility for most of the population” (Braidotti 2011: 6).<sup>4</sup> Indeed, one might ask, whether Selasi’s “self-congratulatory” (Selasi 2005/2013: 530) celebration of mobility and glamorous life-style can do justice to those who live in places not of their choosing and who experience mobility as a site of radical uncertainty rather than a liberating jet-setting experience. How to include the “disposable bodies” (Braidotti 2011: 6) of African migrants, refugees, illegals and exiles into concepts of Afropolitanism? As Rosi Braidotti cogently argues “[t]he contrast between an ideology of free mobility and the reality of disposable others brings out the schizophrenic character of advanced capitalism” (2011: 7). Hence, though referring to the “Africans of the world” (Selasi 2005/2013: 528), the label ‘Afropolitanism’ sets off a dynamics of precarious exclusions, giving way to

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<sup>4</sup> See however Gikandi (2011: 11) who warns that “[a] celebration of Afropolitanism should also, of course, consider the negative consequences of transnationalism, the displacement of Africans abroad, the difficulties they face as they try to overcome their alterity in alien landscapes, the deep cultural anxieties that often make diasporas sites of cultural fundamentalism and ethnic chauvinism.”

a radically diminished and gated version of ‘the world’. It is clear, therefore, that the term ‘the world’ must be considered as a performative concept, i.e., as a concept that brings into being the very community and shared spaces it purports to describe. To be concerned with the power relations involved in the making of world of course also entails the recognition that the right to participate in these performative negotiations of the world is unequally distributed.

### 3 World Literary Studies – Approaching the World

As argued in our introduction, existing research has commonly tied the definition of world literature to the capacity of literary texts to “circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language” (Damrosch 2003: 4). For Damrosch, the global circulation of literary texts, entailing both linguistic and cultural translation, sets off a process of transformation and refraction which imbues the travelling text with alternative, locally grounded meaning. With an eye to the formative force of place, the question of “where is world literature” (Damrosch 2006) therefore gains particular methodological and analytical urgency. And yet, though championing the value of translation, Damrosch also notes that it “is only a further stage” in the worldly circulation of literary texts: “[W]orld literature can also be found when a work circulates across cultural divides separating speakers of a single widespread language like Arabic, Spanish, or French” (2003: 212). That is to say that – beyond the criterion of translatability – texts written in a widespread language cross boundaries more easily and, by implication, have a better chance of making it into the world literary canon. Considering both the status of “English as a global language” (Damrosch 2003: 225) and the fact that the global literary book market is dominated by literary agents that are firmly located in the English-speaking centers of the Global North – in particular New York and London –, it comes as little surprise that texts written in English usually travel much further and faster than texts written in Arabic, Spanish or French. This Anglocentric momentum is enhanced by the fact that, as Damrosch points out, “[t]he power of global English is marked in part by the speed with which popular authors such as Stephen King and J.K. Rowling are translated into dozens of languages” (Damrosch 2009: 65).<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, these trends conspire to establish a global literary market that is inundated by Anglo-

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<sup>5</sup> As a matter of fact, this Anglocentric pattern of circulation is confirmed by the numbers of the top twenty-five source and target languages for translation (provided by UNESCO; qtd. in Beecroft 2015: 255), according to which English ranks at the very top of the 25 source languages, whereas Chinese and Spanish, the world’s most spoken languages (with Chinese spoken by a total of



phone literatures, designed to cater to the tastes, values, expectations and reading practices of western readers.

Though indispensable for an understanding of the socio-economic factors that shape the world literary space, approaches that exclusively tie world literature to global circulation, production and consumption are insufficient for a number of reasons: Firstly, they inevitably replicate the mechanisms that enable processes of circulation in a world riven by hierarchies, asymmetries and injustices. The world that is both presupposed and construed in these approaches is primarily defined in “terms of the circulation of commodities, that is, as the expression, field, and product of transnational market exchange” (Cheah 2016: 5), typically striving towards homogenization (cf. Casanova 2005: 74). This also means that sociological approaches grounded in the quantifying logic of the market make it almost impossible to open up the western world’s literary canon for other, hitherto forgotten and marginalized literary texts that thrive on alternative, non-Eurocentric creative strategies and epistemologies. Secondly, the equation of world literature with global circulation fundamentally underestimates the world-making potential of literature, which frequently materializes in the poetic modelling of worlds that clash with the world of the global market (cf. Cheah 2016; Neumann 2017). Literature has a distinctive agency and affective potentiality, which is vital to the ongoing recreation, remaking and renegotiation of the world as envisioned by globalization (cf. Borsò 2014: 41). And thirdly, the circulation-paradigm falsely assumes that circulation only affects literary texts after their production. Presuming that this ‘site of origin’ is a fixed and culturally contained place, the model overlooks the multifarious ways in which the local is implicated in transcultural exchange. As the ensuing creolization inevitably inscribes itself into the poetics of a text (cf. Friedman 2012: 503), it is necessary to conceptually and methodologically account for the fact that “[c]irculation impacts art before and during the creative process as well as after” (Friedman 2012: 503).

Indeed, due to histories of entanglement and transfer, Afropolitan world literatures are typically marked by a high degree of poetic hybridization. Their transcultural poetics thrives on a number of strategies, including the blurring of western generic conventions, the flaunting of multilingualism and unruly polyphony (Sturm-Trigonakis 2007; Müller 20014: 120), “a suspicion of epistemological privilege” and “an aversion to heroic tones of appropriation and progress” (Walkowitz 2006: 2), the staging of mobile visual experience and peripatetic viewing (cf. Neumann 2016), the preference for open, pluralized epistemologies

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approximately 1,212 million speakers and Spanish by 329 million) are degraded to rank 16 and six respectively.



that emerge through movement (cf. Borsò 2014: 41), the interest in new, multi-layered temporalities that disrupt clear-cut distinctions between past, present and future as well as the modelling of planetary geographies that displace neo-imperial world views (cf. Apter 2013: 8). Broadly speaking, these practices testify to world literatures' effort to combine the cultivation of topographical singularity and experiential particularity with the commitment to a "planetary consciousness" (Pratt 1992: 15). To some extent therefore, the study of world literatures resonates with Apter's "genuinely planetary criticism" that "extend[s] emphasis on the transference of texts from one language to another, to criticism of the processes of linguistic creolization, the multilingual practices of poets and novelists over a vast range of major and 'minor' literatures, and the development of new languages by marginal groups all over the world" (2006: 10).

## 4 Configuring Worlds in Afropolitan Literatures

NoViolet Bulawayo, Teju Cole and Taiye Selasi belong to new generation of transcultural Anglophone writers: while living now, at least part-time, in the USA, the three writers share roots in postcolonial sub-Saharan African countries and are familiar with experiences of diaspora and deterritorialized identity. We have chosen three novels – Cole's *Open City* (2011), Selasi's *Ghana Must Go* (2013) and Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* (2013) – for our discussion of the world-making capacity of contemporary Afropolitan literatures in English. Telling stories of transcultural subjectivities and lives characterized by numerous border-crossings and multiple topographic settings and locations, these novels attest to the extensive migration that characterizes our age. As "Africans of the world" (Selasi 2005/2013: 528), the protagonists' lives – just as the ones of their creators – are characterized by migratory patterns that straddle several continents; at the same time, they are rooted in local practices of their multiple homes.

Bulawayo, Cole and Selasi spent periods of their lives in African countries such as Ghana, Nigeria and Zimbabwe and have an interest in mobility within and beyond the African continent, the new global African immigrants and complex African diaspora identities which include all social strata, lower-, middle- as well as upper-class experiences beyond the 'black Atlantic' paradigm of slavery. As "Africans of the world", they "must form an identity along at least three dimensions: national, racial, cultural – with subtle tensions in between" (Selasi 2005/2013: 530). The questions we want to discuss in this part of our article are how Bulawayo, Cole and Selasi construct and configure worlds in their fiction: what stories of rootedness as well as mobility and exchange do they tell? Which non-Eurocentric geographies and mapping processes that possibly transcend a wes-

tern perspective do they present? How are the relations between locally grounded practices and global trajectories modelled? Do the construed imaginative worlds build on essentializing notions of identity and harbor homogenous communities of cultural and ethnic purity, or do they rather focus on entanglements, amalgamations, blends, mixes, interactions and in-between-ness? What does it mean to be 'African' in the world as presented in these novels, how is the unequally structured world presented and how is mobility distributed amongst people? As outlined above, we base our argument on a performative notion of literature and are hence interested in literature's strong world-making potential, its capacity to configure and fathom alternative world spaces that go beyond the Eurocentric model of center-periphery and are characterized by openness and plurality.

Teju Cole – Nigerian-American writer, photographer, art historian and novelist whose life is characterized by migration and travelling – was born in Kalamazoo, Michigan, to Nigerian parents, but raised in Lagos. In 1992 he returned to Michigan to attend college and has since mostly lived in New York City. His novel *Open City* (2011) negotiates plural and hybrid notions of individual and collective identification in times of enhanced globalization and mass migration. Enhanced mobility is also a characteristic of Cole's protagonist Julius, a young cosmopolite medical doctor, who was raised in Africa by a Nigerian father and a German mother, but who lives now in New York City and has sufficient financial means to travel the world. *Open City* explores rapid processes of globalization, migration and transculturalization against the backdrop of contemporary media landscapes and forms of global communication and interconnectedness. This is why Caren Irr has discussed *Open City* as a 'digital migrant novel' in which Cole replaces "the romance of migrant psychology" (2014: 26) with a focus on the media; the novel is one example of many "works that address the interconnected global environment of the new millennium" (2014: 2).

The settings of *Open City* are several transnationalized spaces with growing diasporic communities in post-9/11 Manhattan and Brussels, whose streets Julius roams and describes in great detail. In addition to describing what can be seen today, his gaze also has temporal depth, unearthing historic layers and traumatic stories of colonization. Strangely enough, the stories of atrocities and exploitation Julius indefatigably collects do not impact his own mind-set and morality. Julius lacks emotional involvement with and dedication to his fellow human beings, and stays disconnected throughout the novel. This is, for instance, the case when he encounters a young asylum-seeker from Liberia who is about to be deported (Cole 2011: 64–70): "I was the listener, the compassionate African who paid attention to the details of someone's life and struggle. I had fallen in love with that idea" (Cole 2011: 70), but he never returned to the young detainee even though he had promised he would. Julius's stories of depraved immigrants, asylum seekers and

other victims of neo-/colonialism have a paradoxical effect: while Julius himself only rarely considers the ethical implications of his visual experiences, his stories urge the readers to focus their attention on the often dire fates of immigrants today. Through the paradoxical interplay between story and discourse (mediating processes, detailed palimpsest descriptions of places, hyperlinked stories of atrocities), Cole's novel reconfigures the world as a place of connections, albeit of connections built on violence and shallow economic entanglements.

As an instance of urban writing, *Open City* contains many descriptions of localities, buildings and interiors, for instance that of a former theater (later turned into a church). Cole's protagonist links the building's style with the experiences of immigrants today:

Across the street from El Malecon [a popular restaurant, BN/GR] was a massive and architecturally bizarre building. It was built in 1930, and was known back then as the Loews 175<sup>th</sup> Street Theatre. Designed by Thomas W. Lamb, it was filled with glamorous detail – chandeliers, red carpeting, *a profusion of architectural ornament within and without – and the terra-cotta elements on the façade drew from Egyptian, Moorish, Persian, and Art Deco styles.* Lamb's stated aim was *to cast a spell of the mysterious on the 'occidental mind,'* with the use of 'exotic ornaments, colors, and schemes.'

[...]

The theater, America's third largest when it was built, seating over three thousand, had hosted films as well as vaudeville shows in its earlier incarnation. [...] Now, from the doorway of El Malecon, in the waning light of a Friday evening, it looked quiet. *The jumble of architectural styles failed, more than seventy-five years on, to resolve themselves into something meaningful.* Even in its best days, it must have looked alien in the environment. *It looked more so now, still reasonably well maintained, but utterly out of place, its architecture a world away from that of the small shops, its grand columns and arches irrelevant to the fatigued immigrants who rarely raised their heads to look above street level. The spell had faded.* (Cole 2011: 234–235; our emphasis)

This description highlights the exotic ornamental elements of the building's façade, which is an aesthetic contact zone, mixing western and oriental styles to enchant the western mind with mysteries. The multicultural ornaments stand in contrast to the new Christian function of the building whose grandeur now seems out of place. The quote is just one example out of many with which Cole has his protagonist highlight the palimpsestic nature of New York City and Manhattan in particular. The many layers of the city tell stories of histories erased and rewritten, in this case one of multicultural architecture “a world away” from today's “fatigued immigrants.” The spell of the mixture has faded; the styles can no longer “resolve themselves into something meaningful.” As this passage makes clear, the world-making potential of Cole's style lies precisely in its commitment to making these hidden layers visible.

Julius impresses the reader with his knowledge of, amongst other things, western visual art, his African ancestors and the musical arts and drama of the ancient Chinese, thus paying tribute to the plurality of aesthetic expressivity. In addition to zooming into the history of the US metropolis and some of its local practices, Julius for instance reports a family trip in his childhood to cultural landmarks in the interior of Yorubaland (the South-Western parts of Nigeria) and describes the historic Deji's Palace in Akure and the Ooni's in Ife

both of them large traditional royal complexes built of mud brick and decorated with massive carved wooden pillars showing aspects of Yoruba cosmology: the world of the living, the world of the dead, the world of the unborn. My mother, deeply interested in the art, explained the iconography to her mother and me. My father wandered around a little bored. (Cole 2011: 34)

These palaces testify to Nigeria's rich cultural past with a plethora of tribal art forms shaped by numerous kingdoms. While it is true that Julius shows a much stronger taste for western literature and the arts (which could be explained by his postcolonial identity, his experiences of displacement and migration in the context of globalization and the pressures of assimilating to western standards of taste), his reference to Yoruba art and his discussion of misrepresentations of Africa in western films (Cole 2011: 29) can be read as his effort to open a poietic world to his western readers that is characterized by plurality and the flattening of aesthetic hierarchies.

When Julius spends his Christmas holiday in Brussels (ch. 7–11), he again gives several descriptions of it:

Brussels is old – a peculiar European oldness, which is manifested in stone – and that antiquity is present in most of its streets and neighborhoods. The houses, bridges, and cathedrals of Brussels had been spared the horrors visited on the low farmland and forests of Belgium. [...] But there had been no firebombing of Bruges, or Ghent, or Brussels. Surrender, of course, played a role in this form of survival, as did negotiation with invading powers. Had Brussels's rulers not opted to declare it an *open city* and thereby exempt it from bombardment during the Second World War, it might have been reduced to rubble. It might have been another Dresden. As it was, it had remained a *vision of the medieval and baroque periods, a vista interrupted only by the architectural monstrosities erected all over town by Leopold II in the late nineteenth century*. (Cole 2011: 97; our emphasis)

Julius is not affected by the traumatic stories he collects, but this quote is a good example of how Julius's descriptions still open an "ethicopolitical horizon" (Cheah 2016: 5) for the readers. Here, the description does not focus on the beautiful medieval and baroque architecture, but shifts attention 'behind the scenes' to the violent, colonialist world-making of Belgium's King Leopold II, who in the late-nineteenth century had monumental architecture built with money

squeezed out of his African colony. Belgium's exploitative, brutal colonial rule in 'Congo Free State' is notorious. Leopold II founded and ran the colony for his personal enrichment. Some of the riches retrieved from his ruthless system of forced labor went into buildings that Leopold II donated to the state. Again, Julius's description of this city – which at first glance seems to focus on its monuments, statues and museums – is characterized by a historical depth and resonates strongly with Belgium's colonial crimes in the Congo. It thus helps to create an imaginative world that makes visible the crimes of colonization and Europe's responsibilities in a postcolonial Africa, which today suffers from the devastating consequences of neocolonialism and capitalist globalization.

To summarize Cole's presentation of a young Afropolitan/cosmopolitan doctor's mobile life, it is important to underline that Afropolitanism/cosmopolitanism is certainly not celebrated, in fact it is a concept thoroughly criticized. Julius is totally unable to develop a sense of belonging (symbolized by his restless walking the streets of New York City and Brussels, meeting people but being unable to get involved, or to defend important causes). The psychological world of Julius is characterized by disconnection, a non-existent sense of belonging and a complete absence of an affective world-relation. He has no meaningful attachments to place, and thus feels neither at home in Nigeria, of which he only has a fading memory, nor in the USA, where he now lives. As Madhu Krishnan has so convincingly demonstrated, Julius is not an Afropolitan, i.e. a young African of the world; for Julius's space represents merely "the illusion of freedom of movement" which "serves as a mask for the continuation of violence" (Krishnan 2015: 675). "Estrangement takes on the appearance of cosmopolitan sophistication" which is only "a cover for violence, alienation and the bondage of postcoloniality in collusion with neoliberalism" (Krishnan 2015: 679).

Taiye Selasi, a writer and photographer, understands herself not as multi-national (that is British, American, Nigerian and Ghanaian), but as "a multi local Afropolitan" (Selasi 2014). Born in London and raised in Massachusetts, she is another leading voice among the young Anglophone novelists and essayists today. Her debut novel *Ghana Must Go* (2013) has been praised for its narrative technique, its intricate depiction of racism and the power of love, its transcultural imagination and presentation of immigrant characters with hybrid US-African (Ghanaian and Nigerian) identities. The novel tells the story of one family: Kweku Sai and his wife Fola Savage as well as their four talented children, Olu (an excellent medical doctor, "a picture of perfection, New Immigrant Perfection," [Selasi 2013: 127]), the twins Taiwo and Kehinde, and Sadie, the youngest daughter. Apart from bulimic Sadie, who will only find her role in life towards the end of the novel when joining dancers in her father's village, the children are all "over-achiever[s]" (Selasi 2013: 136), i.e. well-educated Afropolitans, described by Selasi

in her essay “Bye-Bye Barbar”. When renowned surgeon Kweku Sai is wrongly accused of the death of a patient in the American hospital he works at, he just walks out of his life, leaving his wife a single mother of four. This traumatic event becomes the hub of the plot and haunts his deserted wife and children until Kweku’s death of a heart attack sixteen years later. Only upon his funeral in Ghana do the family members manage to leave behind their pain, their suicidal drives, their fragile psychic conditions by reconnecting on African soil. In addition to personal traumata triggered by the sudden loss of a father and husband (and in Taiwu and Kehinde’s case by sexual abuse through their uncle in Nigeria), Fola Savage and Kweku Sai, too, have to struggle with their own postcolonial *angst* and muted traumatic family histories full of extreme forms of colonial atrocities, racism and the brutal experience of ethnic conflict between the Hausa and Igbo, the anti-Igbo pogroms, the victimization and killing of Yoruba and the Nigerian civil war.

*Ghana Must Go* (2013) is a novel with many settings and plural locales, American, European and African ones, which are described in colourful details. Kehinde, for instance, has become a celebrated young artist with studios in London and Brooklyn and “his dealer in Bern” (Selasi 2013: 161), “a Rhodes, how outstanding, the Latin and Greek” (Selasi 2013: 132). The readers encounter Kehinde after he has recovered from a suicide attempt: “He was twenty-six, young with the newness of money, the strangeness of money and fame and the world” (Selasi 2013: 164). In the two-storey workspace of his Brooklyn studio, “one work-in-progress [is] stretched out on the concrete, some seven feet long, so-called mud-cloth, the new thing, a departure from the portraits he’s made out of beadwork since going abroad” (Selasi 2013: 163). Making portraits of beadwork relies on mixing two art forms which serve the expression of subjectivity and the self: the art of beadwork, which has existed for many centuries in many parts of Africa and the genre of the painted portrait, which since the Renaissance has been a predominant European genre of self-fashioning. Likewise, Kehinde’s new technique of portraiture, ‘mud-cloth’, is again a well-known artistic African tradition, a material charged with symbolic value, which he sells to western art collectors. This mixture of artistic traditions has its parallels in the ethnic mixture of Kehinde’s family with its Ga, Yoruba and Scottish roots. By merging and amalgamating western and African styles, Kehinde invites his readers to rethink aesthetic categories and value the hybridization of cultures. The opening up of transcultural spaces, making the readers see the entanglement of cultures from different parts of the world can be seen in Selasi’s decision to give the Sai family a hybrid genealogy, encompassing African as well as European roots. This is also evidenced by the introduction of Yoruba myths such as that relating to the twins, and the use of multilingualism to underline localities and local experiences (see a

table of “Pronunciations” [Selasi 2013: xi–xii]) and to explain names (e.g. Kehinde = “*kehin de*” = “to arrive next” [Selasi 2013: 84]). But while Selasi’s debut novel with its many locales depicts specific locations as transcultural, her very positive notion of ‘Afropolitanism’ as developed in “Bye-Bye Barbar” seems to have come under scrutiny: though all of the Sai children are young cosmopolitan achievers, they appear to suffer from feelings of displacement and non-belonging. Their diasporic condition prevents them from enjoying middle-class lives, including the financial security and mobility that it allows for.

With Cole and Selasi, NoViolet Bulawayo shares a keen interest in African politics, the representation of Africa in the western mass media and the complex diaspora identities produced by African transnational mobility. Born Elizabeth Zandile Tshele in Zimbabwe, Bulawayo received her university education at Cornell University (MFA), where she held a Truman Capote Fellowship. She went on to become a Stegner Fellow at Stanford University, teaching fiction and creative writing. Bulawayo’s own mobility is paralleled by the mobility of her protagonist Darling, although the latter has not had the distinguished academic career. As we have seen, both Cole and Selasi portray their protagonists as over-achievers, leading the lives of privileged, mobile members of the upper middle class: they resemble cosmopolitan travelers in possession of the right passport and the financial means to jet around the globe. But while the Afropolitans and true “Africans of the world” Selasi described in her 2005-essay (Selasi 2005/2013: 528) feel at home in different metropolises and cultures, the protagonists in her novel – just like Julius – do not form attachments to multiple places, but feel detached wherever they are.

In Bulawayo’s novel *We Need New Names* (2013) the protagonist is underprivileged. Not only Darling’s childhood on the African continent, but also the circumstances of her immigration to the US are far less comfortable than those of Cole’s protagonist. She struggles with cultural assimilation for a long time, eventually realizing that America will never feel like home. The novel is a prime example of world literatures’ potential to create new worlds: the readers encounter Darling and her friends as they re-imagine their shantytown as ‘Paradise’ and an affluent neighborhood as ‘Budapest’. Darling and the other children use their imagination to forget about their hunger and dream of a better life in a ‘real’ country such as the USA. They speak a little English and know their global geography as becomes clear in chapter 3, “Country-Game”. Here, the children’s play involves imagining themselves as countries. Of course,

everybody wants to be the U. S. A. and Great Britain and Canada and Australia and Switzerland and France and Italy and Sweden and Germany and Russia and Greece and them. These are the country-countries. If you lose the fight, then you just have to settle for



countries like Dubai and South Africa and Botswana and Tanzania and them. They are not country-countries, but at least life is better than here. Nobody wants to be rags of countries like Congo, like Somalia, like Iraq, like Sudan, like Haiti, like Sri Lanka, and not even this one we live in – who wants to be a terrible place of hunger and things falling apart? (Bulawayo 2013/2014: 49)

The description of the ‘country-game’ allows the novelist to discuss imaginative geographies and geopolitical power: “country-countries” are the industrialized western countries, while African countries like Botswana, Tanzania, the Congo and Somalia are just countries characterized by poverty and hunger. *We Need New Names* is a coming-of-age-novel narrated in the capturing voice of the 10-year-old Darling. It is comprised of two parts, the first of which deals with Darling’s childhood in a shantytown located in an unnamed African country resembling Zimbabwe. Bulawayo’s representation of African life focuses on everyday political and sexual violence, poverty and illnesses such as Aids. But it is important to note that Bulawayo intersperses her reports on the children’s dire living conditions with the ‘figments’ of their minds, i.e. their imaginative powers to transcend their locality. The novel’s second part presents Darling’s harrowed life after migrating to the USA where she comes to live with her aunt in “Destroy-edmichygen” (Bulawayo 2014: 147) as she calls the economically rundown Detroit, Michigan. As a teenager, Darling struggles with cultural assimilation, and while she eventually learns about and adjusts to an American way of life, American food, popular culture, music and standards of beauty, later, as a young woman, she finds out that America will never feel like a real home. Bulawayo stages dissonances between African and American experiences in order to give expression to the uneasy oscillation between belonging and not-belonging, identity and otherness, here and there. This novel is far from celebrating Afropolitanism and worldliness. In fact, it describes the drawbacks of having an in-between identity, full of nostalgia for the African continent and thus neither able to connect to one’s surroundings nor to cherish new local experiences.

One important topic Bulawayo deals with is the ‘essentializing’ and thoroughly negative representation of Africa in western mass media such as television. Throughout her novel, Bulawayo criticizes the media’s power of world making as stereotypical and uniform, and tailored to western needs. She counters it with literature’s alternative “ethicopolitical” (Cheah 2016: 5) world making. There is one scene in particular that inscribes itself indelibly into the reader’s memory: when Darling and her friends see a large NGO lorry approaching their shantytown, they immediately start ‘doing Africa’. This scene lays bare the western NGO people’s expectations and preconceptions of ‘proper’ Africa and African behaviour:

We immediately stop playing and start singing and dancing and jumping.

What we really want to do is take off and run to meet the lorry but we know we cannot. Last time we did, the NGO people were not happy about it, like we had committed a crime against humanity. So now we just sing and wait for the lorry to approach us instead. The waiting is painful [...]. It's the gifts that we know are inside that make it hard to wait and watch the lorry crawl. [...]

Finally, it arrives, churning dust, like an angry monster. Now we are singing and screaming like we are proper mad. We bare our teeth and thrust our arms upwards. We tear the ground with our feet. We squint in the dust and watch the doors of the lorry, waiting for the NGO people to come out, but we don't stop singing and dancing. We know that if we do it hard, they will be impressed, maybe they will give us more, give and give until we say, NGO, please do not kill us with your gifts! (Bulawayo 2013/2014: 50–51)

'Performing Africa' is what the NGO people want to see and what they will document with their camera, not being aware that the children "are embarrassed by [their] dirt and torn clothing" (Bulawayo 2013/2014: 52). The presents given to the children by the NGO people are "toy guns, some sweets, and something to wear; I get a T-shirt with the word *Google* at the front, plus a red dress that is tight at the armpits" (Bulawayo 2013/2014: 55). Once the NGOs have left, the children "go and play war [...] with the brand-new guns from America" (Bulawayo 2013/2014: 57). As we elaborate elsewhere (Neumann and Rippl 2017), Susan Sontag (1977) once argued that the act of taking photographs is intimately tied to the power of constructing specific versions of the world, including processes of social inclusion and exclusion and related acts of social possession and dispossession. "To photograph", Sontag reminds us, "is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge – and, therefore, like power" (Sontag 1977: 4). The central description of the NGO people and their ways of world-making, however, turns these power relations on their head. For even though the NGO people might seek to establish a sense of self-complacent superiority by turning the Zimbabwean children into commodities to be appropriated by western spectators, the children's performance disrupts these hierarchies. Their performative masquerade playfully asserts agency and resists gestures of objectification; for it is precisely by self-consciously confirming western clichés that the children succeed in undermining them.

Bulawayo mounts a critical discussion of the western mass media's role in producing negative stereotypes of African localities and worlds. She counterbalances these world-making activities, however, by having her protagonist deliver colorful descriptions of African locales and people – even if these locales are poverty-stricken, and male family members are often missing from the scene due to their employment as migrant workers. What is more, the author allows her readers an insight into what it might mean to live in a postcolonial African

country today. By taking the readers deep into the past of Darling's family, to a more traditional and rural Africa – a time when the soil was still fertile but political violence was on the rise – she evokes colonial scenarios repressed by western discourse. The disjunctive temporalities and dynamics of discontinuity she deploys, reveal the historical ruptures and fragmentations at the heart of African postcolonial societies. The ghostly presence of a largely unresolved past conjures up the histories of the transatlantic slave trade and colonization which underlie African experiences of modernity. Moreover, this presence also marks the instability, maybe even failure, of postcolonial African nations, and disrupts the notions of historical progress and continuity by which national orders are conventionally naturalized (Gilroy 1999).<sup>6</sup>

The second part of *We Need New Names* begins with a very short chapter 10 titled "How they left", which depicts Darling's emigration to the USA and "Destroyedmichigan", focusing on the crossing of borders. The repetition of the phrase "leaving in droves" resonates with biblical language and quotes Chinua Achebe's classic *Things Fall Apart* (1959).<sup>7</sup> Darling's encounter with America is depicted as a cumbersome one and does not match the television image she brought with her when she immigrated. By putting the focus on western mass media, Bulawayo criticizes their exclusive right to construct the world. On the one hand, her novel reflects the world-making of the western media's stereotypical coverage of Africa, which consists of one narrative only. On the other hand, it manages to rebalance stories such as the one Achebe told in his renowned novel. Darling meets other immigrants who are carrying around in their wallets "faded photographs of mothers whose faces bore the same creases of worry as our very own mothers, siblings bleak-eyed with dreams unfulfilled like those of our own, fathers forlorn and defeated like ours" (Bulawayo 2013/2014: 243). The faded quality of the photographs parallels the faded quality of the young immigrants' American dream. Lost dreams and the general feeling of defeat makes for a rather dark picture of the immigrants' lives, especially if they are in the USA without papers. When Darling and other immigrants go to places such as Washington DC, New York City, Niagara Falls, Florida or the Grand Canyon they take lots of pictures which they send home "so they could see America. [...] we went everywhere and took and took and took pictures and sent them home, showing off a country that would never be ours" (Bulawayo 2013/2014: 245). At home "[t]hey died waiting, clutching in their dried

<sup>6</sup> For an in-depth discussion of this aspect of Bulawayo's novel cf. Neumann and Rippl (2017).

<sup>7</sup> As Betiel Wasihun has rightly remarked, "the every day struggles for survival and the constant sense of 'things falling apart'" depicted in *We Need New Names* refer to Chinua Achebe's canonical novel *Things Fall Apart* which works "like a leitmotif in Bulawayo's novel" (Wasihun 2016: 396).

hands pictures of us leaning against the Lady Liberty [...]. We could not attend their funerals because we still had no papers, and so we mourned from afar” (Bulawayo 2013/2014: 248). This quote attests to the extent to which world-making capacities in our late capitalist, globalized world are tied to the unequal distribution of financial means. In this way, the novel engages with the ethics of world-making by making visible a side of world economics that usually remains hidden, and it does so in connection with an emotionally charged example: the impossibility of attending a parent’s funeral due to non-existing papers.

When Darling finds an African Mask and a “batik the size of a beach towel” (Bulawayo 2013/2014: 282) in a storage box in the basement of her Aunt Fostalina’s Detroit house, she is unable to decipher the meaning and message of the “numerous crazy patterns” (Bulawayo 2013/2014: 283) of the African mask – possibly the result of growing up in a postcolonial country where people have lost knowledge of their own indigenous culture and art – the African market scene depicted on batik cloth, however, speaks to her. Ekphrases<sup>8</sup> of African batik art are rare in Anglophone literature, and it is worth noticing that Bulawayo uses *enargeia*, a characteristic of ancient western ekphrasis, in order to describe the market with such an intensity of effect (“crazy with life”, “crazy patterns”, “the batik market is mad busy”, “I can hear all sorts of things”, adding sound to visual details) that it is almost coming to life. Her use of ekphrasis and *enargeia* must be read as powerful means of poietic world-making which help to evoke localities of the African continent before the reader’s inner eye. By translating ekphrasis – after all a device that is deeply steeped in western literary history and canon – into African constellations, *We Need New Names* (2013) demonstrates cultural enmeshments and networks. It also renegotiates cultural hierarchies by showcasing local African artistic practices and art forms, while at the same time exposing and thwarting western claims of artistic authority in the process of canon formation (cf. Rippl and Winko 2013). Through this act of translation, the novel makes ekphrasis available for the portrayal of local artistic practices, firmly grounding it in the histories of Africa. Thus the novel not only stresses the need for new names, but also for new ways of world-making, new pictures and new modes of seeing. All of which might spur a renegotiation of globalization by interweaving the global with the local.

Our discussion of the three Afropolitan novels has focused on how they fathom African ways of being in the world, the politics of mobility and the differential abilities of the protagonists and authors to engage in constructions of

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**8** How contemporary postcolonial and transcultural fiction employs ekphrasis and other visual modes of writing is the topic of a book-length study by Birgit Neumann and Gabriele Rippl to be published in 2017.

the world. In all of them, Africa is presented as a place of exchange and mobility, be it for political, economic or family reasons. All three novels depict diasporic movement across sub-Saharan African territory, as well as the global scope of diasporic mobility, including developed nations in Europe and the Americas. Selasi once pointed out that it is hard for critics to categorize her as a writer because she has more than one national identity. Cole and Selasi present protagonists who, despite the typical problems faced by immigrants to western countries – racism – still manage to become successful professionals with ample financial means to travel. Bulawayo, by contrast, focuses more on the fact that few sub-Saharan Africans ever experience a peripatetic lifestyle. She thus indirectly criticizes the concept of ‘Afropolitanism’ as an elitist one. The novels of these young Anglophone African writers represent multiple settings of irreducible uniqueness. The singularity of specific locales, the grounded practices and situated epistemologies contained within these novels constitute interrelated, though differentiated, worldly spaces. But their imaginative worlds also showcase existing power relations and geopolitical realities. While highlighting entanglements, interactions and in-between existences, their imaginative worlds are globalized worlds, ruled by the laws of capitalist exploitation and neo-liberalism. The three novels discuss today’s politics of mobility and the differential abilities of authors as well as protagonists to engage in constructions of the world. It is their achievement to point out literature’s “active power in the making of worlds” (Cheah 2016: 2), literature’s performative potential and ability to open up an “ethicopolitical horizon”, as well as its intervention into common Eurocentric concepts of being in the world and “the fundamental short-coming of equating the world with a global market” (Cheah 2016: 5).

## 5 Making and Marketing Afropolitan World Literatures

Damrosch convincingly argues that the “worlds of world literature are often worlds in collision” (2003: 14). The worlds configured in Afropolitan literatures are shaped by and modelled on multiple transcultural trajectories. These manifest themselves in a complex interweaving of particularized traditions as well as in subject-positions emerging from processes of translocation. Celebrated by numerous critics and publishers as ‘new world literature’ (cf. e.g., Löffler 2014; *Sunday Book Review*, 25/2/2011; *World Literature Today*, July/August 2011; *Die Zeit* 4/2/2015; *Tagesanzeiger* 26/6/2014), the texts by Cole, Selasi and Bulawayo have played and continue to play a major role in imagening new modes of belonging in

our contemporary modernity. But while these world literatures revolve around migratory subjectivities and worldly connectivity, they also display a scepticism regarding the potential of transcultural exchange to foster just, peaceful and ethically sound forms of conviviality. Rather than merely celebrating transculturality or postnationalism or processes of *mondialisation* (see our introduction), *Open City*, *Ghana Must Go* and *We Need New Names* are – in different, though interrelated ways – characterized by a critical and reflexive thrust that materializes through the revelation of asymmetries, inequities and neo-colonial structures in our globalized world. The non-Eurocentric geographies and transitory spaces these literary texts construe are not spaces of freedom, liberation, tolerance and equality. Rather, they are suffused with repressed histories of violence, exploitation and dispossession. Though these world literatures are not committed to the ‘globe’ of globalization but to open worlds that cultivate both singularity and commonality, they make it clear that this worldliness is still ‘one to come’.

Cole’s, Selasi’s and Bulawayo’s texts insistently uncover global asymmetries. They seek to transcend these by a transcultural poetics that displaces the primacy of western creative traditions. Yet the asymmetries are in an uneasy relation to processes of institutionalization. As numerous critics have remarked (cf. e.g., Huggan 2001; Brouillette 2007; English 2008), these processes rely on a marked “imbalance between the locus of reception” and “the subjects those texts represent, refract, consider, or critique” (Brouillette 2007: 7). Whereas the literary agents involved in the canonization of literatures, i.e., publishers, translators, prize committees and critics, are largely placed in the Global North, the subjects represented at least partly relate to the Global South. And indeed it is striking that all three books discussed have been published by major western publishing houses, namely Vintage/Random House (*We Need New Names*), Viking/Penguin Books (*Ghana Must Go*) and Random House (*Open City*). The power of these publishers to allocate world literary value and to make texts travel is amply testified by the fact that the first edition of Cole’s book *Every Day is for the Thief*, published by the Nigerian Cassava Republic Press in 2007, almost went unnoticed by the public. Only when a slightly revised version was published in the US and the UK – this time by Random House and Faber & Faber respectively – in 2014, did the book circulate out into a broader world and attract the attention of a larger global audience (it was subsequently translated in six other languages, named a book of the year in several prestigious literary outlets and shortlisted for the PEN/Open Book Award).<sup>9</sup> Global imbalances become even more apparent when con-

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<sup>9</sup> But even if western publishing houses enhance a text’s travelling potential, world literature’s “regime” of “mobility” is at once one of “immobility” (Mufti 2016: 9). Nigerian writer Adaobi

sidering other major agents in processes of institutionalization, namely literary prizes and reading lists of universities. While the novels by Selasi, Cole and Bulawayo have all been awarded an impressive range of prizes and have been selected as ‘book of the year’ by several magazines, there were only very few African literary institutions involved in this process. Moreover, whereas the three books figure prominently on the reading lists of many English departments across the western world, they play a relatively minor role in the curriculum of most universities on the African continent. This imbalance not only reminds us of the fact that the ‘worlds’ of world literatures are built on privileges, hierarchies and power structures. It also raises a number of questions concerning the possible factors underlying the increasing interest western institutions have recently taken in Afropolitan writing as well as the envisioned audiences of Afropolitan world literatures. On whose terms is Afropolitan world literature created, distributed and evaluated and wherein lies the specific value of these texts? Which critical vocabularies and literary values are invoked and which socio-cultural agendas enacted when discussing Afropolitan literatures? And for whom, one might wonder, is the diasporic African writer writing?

Of course, we cannot answer these questions in any exhaustive way. Instead we will pinpoint aspects that can provide some insight into the multi-layered process of institutionalization. In a 2013 review for *The Guardian*, the Nigerian author Helon Habila implicitly criticized Bulawayo’s book for “performing Africa” for the west and delivering “poverty-porn”. According to Habila, *We Need New Names* constructs Africa in a way that corroborates western stereotypes (HIV, political violence, street children, etc.), thus making spatial and socio-cultural difference available for easy – exoticized and eroticized – consumption. This caused Selasi to take up the case in an article also published in *The Guardian* (4 July 2015), in which she not only defends the creative freedom of African writers but also reflects on the intended audiences of African writing. To the question “for whom is the African writer writing?”, she gives the following answer:

African novelists cannot easily or profitably publish in African countries. But it does not follow that African novelists are writing for the west. Can we really not imagine that the African novelist writes for love: love of craft, love of subject? Do we really believe that she is not an artist but an anthropologist, not a storyteller but a native informant? Would we really suggest that she hasn’t the right to engage a global audience? Many African novelists publish in the west because no alternative path to global readership exists. (Selasi 2015: n. pag.)

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T. Nwaubani for instance laments the sheer unavailability of her books in Nigeria: “Any Nigerian in Anchorage who so wishes can acquire my novel. But here in my country [my] book is available only at a few bookstores” (Nwaubani 2014: n. pag.).



Selasi's answer oscillates somewhat uncomfortably between the right "to profitably publish" and the claim that African novelists first and foremost write for "love of craft" and "love of subject" – and not for an audience. To be sure, existing inequities in opportunities for publishing must be taken seriously and are crucial to the decision taken by African writers to publish in the west.<sup>10</sup> The fate of Cole's first book, but also Selasi's own failed attempts to find a Nigerian publisher are only two examples demonstrating the insoluble ties between the locus of production and the visibility of a respective text. But the prospect of 'profit' is equally a motive for western publishing houses as it is for African writers. Given literature's inevitable subsumption under the forces of the world market, access to western literary institutions is an unequally distributed resource, granted only to few selected African writers. Reflecting on western publishers' dominance and the way this dominance inscribes itself into the stories African authors can tell, Nigerian writer Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani concludes: "Some of the greatest African writers of my generation may never be discovered, either because they will not reach across the Atlantic Ocean to attract the attention of an agent or publisher, or because they have not yet mastered the art of deciphering Western tastes" (Nwaubani 2014: n. pag.). The fact is that the allocation of literary value cannot be decoupled from economic interests, political frameworks and geopolitical power relations. Both the increasing interest of western publishers in African writing in the last decade and the consecration of specific writers arguably resonate with economic considerations and geo-political interests.

Beyond the unquestionable creative merits of the works by Selasi, Cole and Bulawayo, authorship seems to play a crucial role in institutionalizing processes; this of course holds particularly true for the field of postcolonial and transcultural writing, which is frequently assessed in terms of 'identity' and 'locality'. Analysing the enormous visibility of postcolonial literatures on the market and in diverse reading lists, both Graham Huggan and Sarah Brouillette have drawn attention to the fact that in the "global alterity industry" (Huggan 2001: 68) authorship has become "in part a generative and saleable feature" (Brouillette 2007: 7). The reception of postcolonial writers is closely tied to the marketing of their respective authors. Rather than presuming that writers are simply at the mercy of the global market, Brouillette claims that writers self-consciously fashion their authorship to attend to and intervene in the dictates of commerce. Bringing into dialogue author, reader and text, "postcolonial authorship", according to Brouillette,

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<sup>10</sup> Selasi's claim, however, that western publishing industries offer access to a truly "global readership" is at least open to debate.

comprises “a set of literary strategies that operate through assumptions shared between the author and the reader, as both producer and consumer of work to negotiate with, if not absolve themselves of, postcoloniality’s touristic guilt” (Brouillette 2007: 7). As authors respond to the mechanisms and demands of the current publishing industry, a more or less deliberate self-construction of the author-figure as someone who is aware of the political implications of his/her work as well as its subsumption under the logic of the market, has become an important “paratext” (Brouillette 2007: 2) for the reception of postcolonial literature. Obviously, the evocation and enactment of authorship fulfills a range of functions, such as imbuing the text with a sense of authenticity, branding and marketing a text, catering to the demands of the contemporary ‘celebrity culture’ and its craving for commodified biographies.

In the current regime of world literatures, it seems that Selasi, Cole and Bulawayo do not so much epitomize what Brouillette (2007: 7) calls “postcolonial authorship”, whose authority hinges on his/her connection to “a given political location” (Brouillette 2007: 3–4). Rather, they embody a more recent form of ‘transcultural authorship’. Straddling diverse continents and multiple cultural legacies, Selasi, Bulawayo and Cole consciously place themselves as intermediaries or translators who negotiate between the conflicting, but entangled values, histories and economies of the Global South and the Global North. Selasi and Cole in particular enjoy a great visibility in the media. They have given various interviews and talks in which they patiently negotiated their hybrid identities and multiple belongings, mediating the contested space between literature, specialized research, personal experience and public address. While explaining so-called western traditions from the perspective of the transcultural migrant and offering their inside knowledge of specific African cultures to western audiences, they also highlight the multiple entanglements between western and African worlds. As the proliferation of the tag ‘Afropolitan’ shows, their transculturality has become a significant element in their institutionalization – a process which their fictional narratives both reference and refract through various forms of self-inscription. Certainly the success of these novels – written in English – also hinges on the fact that the authors playfully allude to and refract their own migratory histories. In turn, the embracement of ‘Afropolitan’ authors by western publishing industries, critics, institutions and scholars testifies to the celebration of ethnic difference “in the genteel leisure industry” (During 2009: 57) that deals in alterity so as to serve the neoliberal inclinations of bourgeois readerships. More specifically, the celebration of authors who embody a highly successful and privileged form of transculturality might indeed be indicative of the west’s neo-colonial guilt and the longing for other, positive images of the African immigrant.

The world of Afropolitan literatures, we have tried to show, is indeed a highly contested and pluralized one, i.e., a world, in which literary creativity, market dynamics, authors and readers across multiple geographies – the Global North and the Global South – entertain complex and conflicting relations. To capture this plurality – and thus to do justice to the world – the study of world literatures can never be singular or simple but must entail readings that are sensitive to both the world-making capacities of literatures, the demands of the market, the creative interventions by authors and multiple readings across the world.

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